

Business Profile

›SKILLSOFT

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NorthernIreland
fresh talent at work



Belfast proves an ideal location for developing e-learning software

As technology continues to accelerate the pace of everyday business life, today's office worker has more information than ever before to process and assimilate - and less time to do it in.

That's one of the main drivers behind the rapid growth of e-learning - a market potentially worth hundreds of billions of dollars - as more and more corporations discover the benefits of moving classroom training and other types of on-the-job learning to the Web.

Whether it's used to educate employees about time management or to familiarise them with new financial accounting practices, e-learning - according to recent research - can half training time and cut costs by 60% compared to traditional training methods. In addition, it produces instant feedback, measurable results and much higher information retention rates.

SkillSoft Inc of Nashua, New Hampshire has been swift to establish first-mover advantage in this burgeoning market. Founded in early



1998, the company offers a depth-and-breadth of subject coverage in the field of critical business skills that is orders of magnitude larger than any other supplier in the market. SkillSoft also offers clients online subscriptions to libraries of IT and business books and journals, called "Referenceware," for just-in-time learning on a broad range of subjects.

With more than 330 customers, including IBM, British Telecom, Xerox, Ernst & Young and Anheuser-Busch, SkillSoft has worked closely with a

variety of strong development partners and content experts to create a world-leading library of more than 1,000 courses and complementary simulations. The SkillSoft business skills library encompasses a wide array of business skills, such as management, leadership, communication, project management and customer service, as well as business subjects such as e-commerce, finance, marketing, sales and strategy. Referenceware libraries, which include more than 1,700 titles from 65 different publishers, cover a wide variety of IT and business topics.

"To maintain our leadership position, we need access to the best people, the most up-to-date infrastructure and world leading academic resources... In Northern Ireland we have found all three."

CHUCK MORAN
President and CEO, Skillsoft

To meet growing international demand for its course and Referenceware libraries, SkillSoft recently chose Belfast as the location for its first software development center outside the United States.

According to Chuck Moran, President and CEO of SkillSoft, the company considered a number of possible locations in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland before making the decision to invest in Belfast.

"We knew of Northern Ireland's reputation as a center for good quality software engineers. A site visit confirmed that reputation and gave us a very positive impression of the business opportunities there - an impression that was further reinforced by the enthusiasm and support for the project shown by the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland (IDB) (now Invest Northern Ireland).

"We were also struck by the quality of the region's education system. The software focus at Queen's University, Belfast and the University of Ulster coupled with the universities'

close involvement with local companies was of particular interest to us. Northern Ireland's strongly pro-business and cost-effective infrastructure were also important considerations as was its excellent digital telecommunications network which has ensured fast voice and data communications with our New Hampshire headquarters," says Moran.

Opened in March 2001, SkillSoft's Belfast center works along side development teams in New Hampshire to create the software tools used to produce the content of new courses. The Belfast team also helps with development work on the player used to deliver course content on PCs and on SkillPort, SkillSoft's browser-based learning platform which gives learners the ability to set up personal curricula and also tracks and reports on course usage and learner performance

Says David Houston, manager of the Development Center: "Hiring fresh technical talent is critical to the success of our company. We're planning to build up our workforce to at least 40 over the next couple of

years having recently taken on our first batch of eight employees.

"We've been extremely happy with the calibre of people we've recruited so far. Everyone hired to date has obtained at least a primary degree. All of our new software developers are Java experienced and we've also been able to hire some excellent quality assurance personnel from other software companies based locally.

"In this type of operation, we required an unusual mix of management, technical and interpersonal skills and I'm pleased that despite a global shortage of people with key skills, we've got off to a very successful start.

"In the coming months we'll be concentrating on developing close ties with both universities for longer term recruitment purposes.

"In addition, as we've been very impressed with the technology capabilities of Queen's and the University of Ulster and with their teaching departments, we'll also be looking at how we can make best use of these resources both in terms of our technology and course content.

As Chuck Moran says: "E-learning is a vast market that is expanding at breakneck speed. To maintain our leadership position, we need access to the best people, the most up-to-date infrastructure and world leading academic resources."

"In Northern Ireland, we've found all three," he adds.